

Bruce Springsteen: Searching for faith in the 21st Century American Depression

by Peter Stone Brown

In 1944, writing a script for a radio show Woody Guthrie wrote:

“I hate a song that makes you think that you are not any good. I hate a song that makes you think that you are just born to lose. Bound to lose. No good to nobody. No good for nothing. Because you are too old or too young or too fat or too slim too ugly or too this or too that. Songs that run you down or poke fun at you on account of your bad luck or hard traveling. I am out to fight those songs to my very last breath of air and my last drop of blood. I am out to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your world and that if it has hit you pretty hard and knocked you for a dozen loops, no matter what color, what size you are, how you are built, I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work.”

Bruce Springsteen must have that quote somewhere in his mind when approaching, writing the songs, and compiling the array of sounds for his new album, *Wrecking Ball*.

The landscape for *Wrecking Ball* is as bleak as Nebraska and ultimately angrier than anything he’s yet produced. The characters are familiar and echo those on past albums and songs, though this time the struggle is harder, perhaps impossible and the rewards, even the small ones are not necessarily in sight or likely to appear. Despite this the overall effect of the album is curiously and strangely uplifting following the precept that songs are to elevate the spirit.

In recording these songs, Springsteen channeled into the indefinable spirit of creation that goes way beyond the subject matter. Considering that Springsteen told *Rolling Stone*, the songs started as folk music, the production and instrumentation on the album at times is massive. At times it seems as if he’s tapping into every sound he ever heard. The result is an ambiance that is at times spooky and foggy that casts an overall feeling of what the hell happened?

Taking a cue from the Bob Dylan manual of cut and paste songwriting, Springsteen borrows and quotes liberally from a variety of sources both musical and lyrical, including Dylan himself, Johnny Cash, Curtis Mayfield, Guthrie and Irish folk music.

On the opening track, the fairly generic “We Take Care Of Our Own,” which replicates a classic E Street Band sound (though the full band

itself is not on the album), Springsteen clues you into what's coming with the line: "The road of good intentions has gone dry as a bone."

The tone changes immediately on the next song, "Easy Money," an upbeat country-tinged rocker about a guy going out to rob or burglarize someone. The mood of the song is one of sheer joy and the opening lines which echo earlier Springsteen songs lead you to believe he's going on a date, until you get to the second verse:

*There's nothing to it mister, you won't hear a sound
When your whole world comes tumbling down
And all them fat cats they just think it's funny
I'm going on the town now looking for easy money*

From there Springsteen slips into a slow, sad ballad "Jack of All Trades," apparently about someone out of work, struggling trying to reassure himself of his own worth. Set to an almost Memphis soul ballad piano, with a mournful trumpet solo, Springsteen sings a line that could have come right out of a Woody Guthrie Dust Bowl ballad: *The banker man grows fatter, the working man grows thin/It's all happened before and it'll happen again*, concluding with: *If I had me a gun, I'd find the bastards and shoot 'em on sight*, which is capped by a searing guitar solo from Tom Morello.

This is followed by the part field holler, part Irish dance tune, "Shackled And Drawn," which again chronicles the work theme in a rather joyous manner though the lyrics are anything but. On one hand there's again the feel of self worth:

I always love the feel of sweat on my shirt/Stand back, son, and let a man work/Let a man work, is that so wrong?

Nut then the next verse again channels Guthrie:

Gambling man rolls the dice, working man pays the bills/It's still fat and easy up on bankers hill/Up on bankers hill the party's going strong/Down here below we're shackled and drawn.

The song ends seemingly at a revival meeting, as the concertinas fade into a sample from Lyn "The Female Preacher" Collins' "Me and My Baby Got Our Own Thing Going:"

I want everybody to stand up tonight, stand up and be counted tonight, you know we got to pray together.

This sets the stage for what is perhaps the key song on the album and definitely the angriest, "Death To My Hometown." It is easily one of the wildest things Springsteen has recorded, cast as an Irish ballad, with Springsteen taking on well, an Okie via New Jersey sort of Irish accent, with background singers singing something incomprehensible behind him though one can make out at times "Yippee Ti Yi Aye," over a sample of Alabama Sacred Harp Singers' "The Last Word of Copernicus," which was originally recorded by Alan Lomax. The feel is like a crazy drunken Irish wake taking place in an Alabama church with whoopin' and hollerin' mixed in with a tin whistle march and an Irish battle ballad. Never losing character, this leads Springsteen to intone in the second verse:

*No shells ripped the evening sky, no cities burning down
No armies stormed the shores for which we'd die
No dictators were crowned
I awoke from a quiet night, I never heard a sound
Marauders raided in the dark and brought death to my hometown,
boys
Death to my hometown*

But Springsteen doesn't stop there. He saves the best for the last verse:

*Send the robber barons straight to hell
The greedy thieves who came around
And ate the flesh of everything they found
Whose crimes have gone unpunished now
Who walk the streets as free men now*

Serious shit indeed and one wonders what would happen if the millions of Springsteen fans acted upon the lyrics of this song. Springsteen in his personal life may not have been affected by this depression masked by the media as a recession, but he's certainly seen and felt it. And hearing this song, I can't help thinking about when a year ago, I returned to the neighborhood where I grew up to attend a function, and what had been a thriving shopping area when I was a kid, was boarded up and closed, a virtual ghost town. Such a thing was unimaginable when I was a kid and I couldn't believe it.

The totally mournful, "This Depression," sets the stage for the climb back up. In this song, Springsteen totally inhabits the feelings of someone who's been economically crushed trying to hold onto to the faintest glimmer of hope: *I've been down/But never this down, I've been low/But never this low*. Again Tom Morello's guitar perfectly captures the feel.

With “Wrecking Ball,” a little more than midway through the album, Springsteen starts to shift gears dramatically. Musically, a classic Springsteen song which was written and debuted originally as a paean to Giants Stadium before its imminent demolition, in the context of this album it serves as a metaphor. There’s no doubting what he’s talking about when he sings:

So hold tight on your anger, you hold tight on your anger/Hold tight to your anger, don't fall to your fear,

or in the next verse:

And all our little victories and glories have turned into parking lots/When your best hopes and desires are scattered through the wind, and then repeats almost endlessly: And hard times come, and hard times go before finally concluding with, Yeah just to come again.

The song starts with Springsteen solo on guitar, but builds and builds into a full band majestic trumpet interlude. The placement of this song at this point in the album changes the mood from despondence to the search for a glimmer of hope.

Before getting there, he pauses for perhaps the reason, a simple song of pure sex and romance, “Baby, You’ve Got It.”

Then it’s straight to church for “Rocky Ground,” which among other things again samples an Alan Lomax recording, “I’m A Soldier In The Army of the Lord,” by the Peerless Four, and features a rap written by Springsteen but delivered by Michelle Moore which contains the key lyrics:

*You pray that hard times, hard times, come no more/
You try to sleep, you toss and turn, the bottom's dropping out/Where you once had faith now there's only doubt/You pray for guidance, only silence now meets your prayers/The morning breaks, you awake but no one's there*

The next song “Land of Hope and Dreams,” was debuted in concert in 1999. Again he returns not only to his organ and piano sound augmented by a gospel choir, but basic Springsteen themes of escape, dreams and hope, incorporating the song “This Train Is Bound For Glory” into the lyrics combined with lines from Curtis Mayfields’ “People Get Ready,” and when he does so, he delivers one of the most passionate vocals he’s ever recorded, especially when he shouts out, “Dreams will not be thwarted.”

A sound of scratchy vinyl leads into the closing, "We Are Alive," which borrows the riff from Johnny Cash's hit, "Ring of Fire," (which was actually written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore). The song is one of the most poetic Springsteen has ever written, and the second verse which echoes the sentiment of the song, "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," tells all:

A voice cried out, I was killed in Maryland in 1877/When the railroad workers made their stand/Well, I was killed in 1963 one Sunday morning in Birmingham/Well, I died last year crossing the southern desert/My children left behind in San Pablo/Well they left our bodies here to rot/Oh please let them know/We are alive/Oh, and though we lie alone here in the dark/Our souls will rise to carry the fire and light the spark/To fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart

Wrecking Ball will be released on March 6th, and as is the habit with major releases these days will come in a few editions. The special bonus edition will contain two more songs, "Swallowed Up (In The Belly Of The Whale)" and "American Land."

Wrecking Ball is easily the best album Springsteen has delivered in a very long time. Considering the daring creativity he took in recording the songs, and especially the context of the times in which it was created, it is also one of his most important.